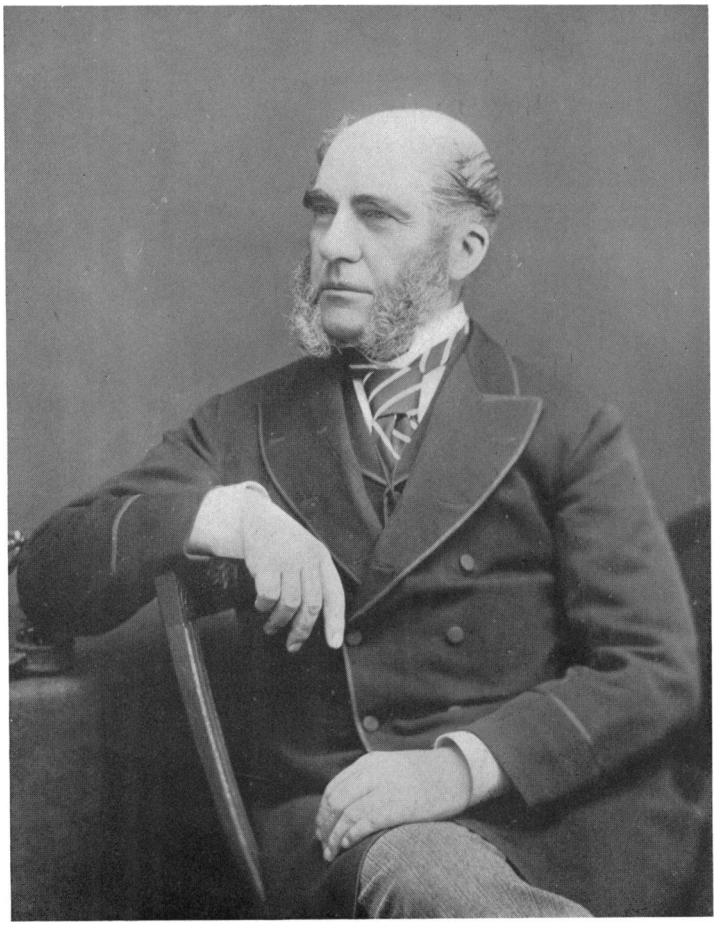

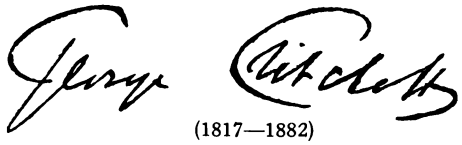

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14.—GEORGE CRITCHETT, F.R.C.S., 1817–1882

BY

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THIS brief biographical sketch is offered in respectful memory of George Critchett, and to recall the important part he played at the birth of modern Ophthalmology. The writer is indebted to Sir Anderson Critchett for much of the information here set forth.

George Critchett was born in London on March 25, 1817. He was educated at a private school in Highgate. The story of his boyhood throws no light on what determined him to adopt medicine as a career, but at the age of seventeen he was apprenticed to Mr. John Scott, a well-known surgeon of the London Hospital. He enrolled as a medical student at the London Hospital, where his great capacity for work brought him at once to the notice of his teachers. He became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1839, and shortly afterwards was appointed Demonstrator of Anatomy at the London Hospital.

From the commencement of his medical career he was attracted to the study of Diseases of the Eye, and he attended Moorfields Hospital, where he came under the influence of Tyrrell and Dalrymple, who at that time were the leading ophthalmic surgeons

in London. In 1844, an election of assistant surgeon was held at Moorfields. The appointment was gained by Mr. James Dixon, but the governors were so much impressed by Critchett's testimonials, as well as by their knowledge of his work while a student, that they created an additional post to which they elected him. His colleagues at the time of his appointment to the medical staff were Mr. John Scott, Mr. Gilbert Macmurdo, F.R.S., and Mr. John Dalrymple, F.R.S., in addition to Mr. James Dixon. His foot was now firmly placed on the ladder, and the sterling value of his work, and the rapidity of his success thoroughly justified the governors in making a special appointment in his favour.

The Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons was instituted about this time, and of those elected to an Honorary Fellowship was William Bowman, who was then an assistant surgeon at King's College Hospital. Critchett was not one of those chosen, because at that time special hospitals were not held in high favour, and his appointment of assistant surgeon at Moorfields was not considered of sufficient importance to entitle him to the Honorary Fellowship, Nothing daunted, however, he was one of a band of 23, who went up for the first examination for the Fellowship, and was among the eight successful candidates, seven of whom it is worthy of note were demonstrators of anatomy, and two of them Henry Lee and Luther Holden, afterwards became well-known surgeons.

In 1846, Critchett was a candidate for the post of assistant surgeon at the London Hospital. In those days the appeal was made not to a selection committee but to the whole body of governors. After a very keen contest, Critchett was elected by a majority of five, his opponent being Mr. Nathaniel Ward. He was appointed assistant to Mr. James Luke, and for fifteen years he faithfully discharged his arduous duties. During this time he did much good work in general surgery, and established valuable methods of treatment especially in ulcers of the lower extremity. He was the first in this country to treat varicose ulcers by compression, and his methods are now generally adopted. He also showed considerable capacity and boldness as an operator, greatly excelling in operations for lithotomy and excision of joints. In 1861, he was promoted to the office of full surgeon. He had served long for that appointment, but he held it for rather less than two years. He was becoming so absorbed in his work at Moorfields, and in private practice that he felt he could not in fairness hold it any longer. It was at Moorfields he found work most congenial to his tastes, and it was there his ingenious and resourceful mind devised operations, which his neatness and delicacy of touch enabled him to perform with wonderful success. His career as an ophthalmic surgeon, moreover, was coincident with an extraordinary advance in that branch of medical science, and he

took a leading part in the advocacy and application of the improved methods of examination and treatment which were constantly being introduced. He saw the introduction of all the methods of research and treatment that we owe to Helmholtz, Donders, von Graefe, Bowman, Knapp and Liebreich.

It was about this time that Bowman, whose tastes and inclinations had always lain in the direction of general surgery, began to interest himself in diseases of the eye, and it was Critchett who advised him to devote himself to ophthalmology. In their early days Bowman was assistant surgeon at Moorfields under Critchett, but the latter with singular generosity begged the Committee to appoint his friend to the senior staff. He had the great satisfaction of having his request granted, and the two remained colleagues and close friends until the retirement of the one and the death of the other. They were a constant source of stimulus and encouragement to each other, and did more than any other two men of their time to raise the standard of British Ophthalmology, and to make Moorfields so widely known that it came to be regarded as an ophthalmic Mecca, to which came ophthalmologists from all parts of the world. Donders and von Graefe came to London in 1851, and that was the beginning of a remarkable friendship among those four men—a friendship broken in 1870 by the tragic death of von Graefe, the youngest of them all.

Critchett had special gifts as a teacher. His knowledge of literature and command of language enabled him to expound his subject in its most attractive form, and he would often impress an important point upon the memory of his students by the use of a happy illustration or by an appropriate reminiscence drawn from his own wide experience. His influence was also largely personal. He possessed a magnetism which never failed to attract younger men, who speedily became his devoted disciples. He did not write much, and his papers are scattered in medical journals, and in the Royal London Ophthalmic Hospital Reports, but everything he wrote bears the stamp of his own knowledge and individual experience. His clinical acumen was remarkable; he had a special gift for prognosis, and with wonderful prescience could predict the course a disease was likely to follow. He was always much interested in inflammation of the cornea, and Sir Anderson Critchett remembers that in one of the many professional conversations which they had together, his father said: "I nearly anticipated Hutchinson: for in a lecture which I gave on Strumous Ophthalmia, I said: the flattened nose and the strange marks about the mouth which are seen in many of those little sufferers almost make one imagine that they are the victims of hereditary syphilis." These words, the *ipsissima dicta* of his father, made a great impression on the son's mind and have continued to live in his memory.

In 1854, Critchett delivered a short course of lectures on Diseases of the Eye at the Medical School of the London Hospital. These lectures, written with great power and eloquence, were afterwards published in the *Lancet*, and attracted so much attention that the author was brought at once into prominent notice as an ophthalmic surgeon. They deal with the clinical aspects of ophthalmology, and are a masterly exposition of the knowledge of the time. They will well repay careful perusal, because they contain much valuable information about the treatment of ocular affections that is as helpful to-day as it was at the time the lectures were published. It is a great misfortune when knowledge of this kind is forgotten, and when the clinical experience gained by one generation is not made full use of by the next; but to the unspeakable loss of mankind, clinical experience too often dies with the clinician, and each generation of doctors is fated to make its own mistakes. In 1876, Critchett succeeded Mr. Hulke as ophthalmic surgeon and lecturer in ophthalmic surgery at the Middlesex Hospital, and a well-known surgeon of that hospital recently told the writer how profoundly he had been impressed by Critchett as a teacher, and how, as he watched him at work, he had been fired with the ambition to become an ophthalmic surgeon—an ambition which only stress of circumstances prevented him from fulfilling.

It was as an operator that Critchett was unsurpassed. As has already been said, his special manual dexterity had been noticed from the very outset of his career as a surgeon, and his peculiar skill became more and more conspicuous as his responsibilities increased. Courage and confidence were qualities which characterised all his operative procedures, but he was never rash, the interest of his patient being always uppermost in his mind. He also had the power to inspire confidence, a power begotten of a warm sympathy with suffering, to the relief of which all his energies were concentrated. His colleagues had great trust in his judgment, and constantly sought his advice. On these occasions a sure clinical instinct enabled him to know when to operate and when not to operate, and a ripe experience helped him successfully to devise operative procedures specially suited for the case under consideration.

He introduced into practice several methods of great value, and in many operations his peculiar skill wrought changes, which guided others to larger and more important modifications. Comparatively early in his career he published his method of subconjunctival tenotomy in operations for squint. This method of dividing the recti muscles by hook and scissors beneath the conjunctiva was peculiarly his own, and later on he developed it further in his operation for enucleation of the eyeball. Critchett first suggested and performed this operation on a patient

in Moorfields in 1851, and described it shortly afterwards in the *Lancet*. His idea was quite original, because he knew nothing of the work of Ferrall and others on the same lines. It soon became the recognised method of removing an eye, and no wonder when it is compared with the old operation, which was little short of barbarous. In the old method the globe was pulled forward by a thread which had been passed through it; the palpebral fissure was then freely divided to enlarge the opening; and a sharp double-edged pliable scalpel was plunged to the apex of the orbit, and swept round so as to divide all the structures that retain the eye. Critchett also devised the operation of iridodesis for making an artificial pupil, and abscission for staphyloma of the cornea. He also modified the von Graefe method of cataract extraction, and introduced a discussion on that subject before the Ophthalmological Congress at Heidelberg in 1864. It was after hearing Critchett's paper that von Graefe invented the narrow knife which bears his name. Linear extraction of cataract was at that time severely on its trial, and it is not too much to say that it was Critchett's advocacy at Heidelberg that saved it. He also, along with Bowman, did much to establish iridectomy in acute glaucoma when it was first introduced by von Graefe, in spite of the vigorous campaign of opposition against that operation at the time of its introduction.

Critchett always spoke with a persuasive charm, which was enhanced by a musical voice and a perfect delivery; and on occasion he could rise to a high pitch of eloquence. There are those living who can still remember the dramatic fire and force with which he defended successfully a former colleague at the London Hospital, whose professional position had been unjustly assailed. He was also an admirable French scholar, and could speak as fluently and eloquently in French as he could in his mother tongue. He greatly enjoyed attending meetings of ophthalmic surgeons on the Continent, and taking part in their discussions. In 1867, when he was just in his prime, the International Ophthalmological Congress, over which von Graefe presided, was held in Paris. de Wecker invited Critchett to operate on a German woman, blind from bilateral senile cataract. His son, at that time a medical student, had accompanied his father to the Congress and assisted at the operation, at the same time diverting the patient's attention by talking to her in her own language. Critchett operated on the right eye with his right hand, and on the left eye with his left. von Graefe was so overcome by the brilliant success of the operations that he publicly kissed the operator on both cheeks.

Critchett became a member of Council of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1870. He was President of the Hunterian Society

during two successive years, and Vice-President of the ophthalmological section of the International Medical Congress in London in 1881. He was also corresponding member of the Imperial Academy of Medicine of Rio de Janeiro, and an Honorary Member of the Academy of Medicine of Brussels. The Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom was formed in 1880, and Critchett was elected one of the Vice-Presidents. During the first session he contributed a paper on the value of peritomy in the treatment of chronic vascularization of the cornea, and in the second session he took a prominent part in the discussion on sclerotomy. At the Second Annual Meeting, in the absence of the president—Sir William Bowman—he delivered an address. At the time of this meeting his intimate friends knew that he was suffering from enlarged prostate, cystitis and granular kidney, but as he was not only attending to his practice with apparently unabated vigour, but also performing his numerous social engagements with all his accustomed hospitality and courtesy, it was hoped that his valuable life would be spared. It had been otherwise ordered, and he died somewhat suddenly on the morning of November 1, 1882, after having been laid aside only for a few weeks. Sir William Bowman made sympathetic reference to the loss of his "almost life-long friend" at the meeting of the Ophthalmological Society in the following December, and on the same evening the Council unanimously passed the following resolution: "That the Council of the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom desire to record their sense of the great loss sustained by the Society, as well as by the profession at large, in the death of one of their Vice-Presidents, George Critchett, whose extended reputation at home and abroad, rested on the solid foundation of important services rendered to that department of the Medical Art to which he was chiefly devoted, and whose kindness of heart and excellent judgment were universally recognised and esteemed."

Thus passed a charming and impressive personality, and one of the most gracious of men. When Critchett died, rich and poor alike lost a friend. He was generous to a fault. His greatest pleasure was to dispense hospitality, and on the frequent occasions when friends gathered round his table his cultured versatile mind, his refined artistic tastes and his love for all athletic sports made him an ideal host. Those who knew George Critchett personally are now a small and rapidly diminishing band; but his name will be honoured by successive generations of ophthalmic surgeons not only for the valuable contributions which he has made to the science and practice of ophthalmology, but also for the example which he has left of a life of high endeavour crowned by successful achievement.